

Panel Set to Rid Fla. Schools of Junk Food

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Potato chips, soft drinks and other junk food may disappear from Florida schools under 21 draft recommendations approved by the governor's task force on obesity.

The 16-member panel headed by Miami cardiologist Zachariah P. Zachariah formulated its recommendations from more than 450 initial suggestions gathered during three daylong sessions during which researchers, dietitians, fitness professionals and others told members about issues ranging from school vending machines to the effects of stress on eating.

In 2002, more than half of Florida's adults were overweight and nearly one-fifth were considered obese, according to the Department of Health. About one-fourth of all high school students consider themselves overweight, according to state statistics.

The task force's recommendations emphasize the role of the family in promoting a life of healthy nutrition and physical activity. They call for a coordinated effort between parents and schools, including a return to mealtimes spent as a family without distractions and limiting television viewing or computer time to two hours a day.

Communities, businesses, faith-based and civic groups and volunteer health organizations must team up to support access to lifelong opportunities for physical activity, the panel stressed. Those opportunities can include parks and recreation facilities, bike paths, sidewalks and walking paths as part of any proposed new construction. The panel's recommendations would call for school districts to monitor compliance with U.S. Department of Agriculture and Centers for Disease Control guidelines in school nutrition offerings, including what is offered in school vending machines.

It recommended that school districts work with businesses and other organizations to replace any money the schools fill the economic needs that are now met with the profits from vending machine contracts. Every school district would be required to maintain a nutritional advisory panel, which could revise nutritional offerings on school grounds.

"The most important thing is education," Zachariah said. "If you look at some of the recommendations we've made regarding vending machines, you can certainly change some of what is being offered. But the critical thing is to make sure that local school boards make sure that what is being sold is of at least minimal nutritional value."

Schools would also be charged with complying with current federal guidelines for physical activities and fitness, possibly returning a regular physical education program to schools.

The committee will meet again on Jan. 9 and 15, and send its report to the governor by Feb. 15, said Lindsay Hodges, a spokeswoman for the Florida Health Department.

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